

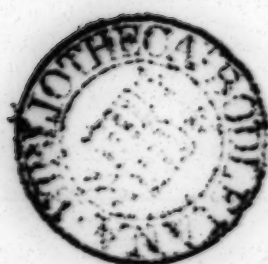
A  
L E T T E R  
TO  
T H E A U T H O R  
OF THE  
PROPOSAL for the ESTABLISHMENT  
OF  
PUBLIC EXAMINATIONS.

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C A M B R I D G E :

Sold by FLETCHER and HODSON.

[MDCCLXXIV.]



S I R,

**I**F I may judge of the sense of that majority which threw out the last Grace for the Establishment of a new Mode of Discipline in the University, from my own Opinion on that subject, I must beg leave to hint to you that you mistake the nature of the objections which are made to your favourite scheme. Many perhaps who had no reasons at all, and others who were too reserved or too indolent to lay open their sentiments, were contented to fix upon something like objections to the several articles of your plan. The real objections which the most sensible part of them conceived were of a totally different nature; at least as I have been taught to apprehend from frequent conversations on that subject; and as I cannot help saying I had originally conceived myself. Their objections go to the whole Idea: They are enemies to any alteration whatever in the mode of education, unless it be brought about by very slow degrees and almost imperceptibly.

I have not leisure nor inclination, nor perhaps ability to enter into a methodical discussion of this important subject; nor to answer one by one the arguments of ingenious zeal buoyed up by the

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hopes of the glorious name of a reformer. My intention is to give to the public some of those objections which have been thrown out by men of sense, and men of the world; and which I suppose to have weighed with those who have refused to concur in your plausible and fair-faced scheme of reformation. I know that it has been long lamented, and it is, no doubt, much to be lamented, that Noblemen and Fellow-Commoners have not greater incentives, not to say obligations, to study. I admit that it is a public calamity, that those who from their rank or fortune are destined to fill the first places in this country, and to be the mind of the national body, should lose those early opportunities of preparing their understandings for the knowledge and business of the world; but we are not to impute to a defect in university education, that which proceeds from the idle vanity of parents, or which is the almost necessary consequence of opulent circumstances or great expectations. Who will listen to the complaints of that Father who is tickled with the gold or silver Tassel of his boy, and wonders that with so pretty an exterior the young 'Squire should have had no attention to spare to what is within? If the acquisition of knowledge is the great view of parents, or rather if the strengthening the powers of the mind, the forming a habit of study and attention, and a passion for information, are the objects which they have principally before them, let them divest themselves and their children of the vanity of early and puerile distinctions,

functions, and I'll venture to say that in no place in Europe can those important ends be more certainly and sooner attained than in this university.

But you are ready to say, that as Parents will certainly continue to admit their sons Fellow-Commoners; and to complain of their extreme ignorance; it is the duty of the University to contrive every possible incentive, and to afford all possible opportunities to study. But though I allow that it is much to be wished that such opportunities were afforded, I think there is great danger, if not moral certainty, that such a scheme will be found impracticable, and its failure draw with it the worst of consequences. The order of Fellow-Commoners has by immemorial usage a kind of prescriptive right to idleness; and fashion has inspired it with an habitual contempt of discipline. The ideas of returning again to school would fill them with indignation: and though the most perfect plan of discipline were formed, it would scarcely be possible to give to it that authority, which is necessary to command attention and compliance. With high spirits, humour and custom on their side, it would be an easy matter for them to give an air of ridicule to the solemn ceremony of examination; and the example of a few lively and refractory geniuses would be sufficient to prevent all emulation whatsoever, and to fix the name of pedantry upon those, who in the opinion of the order would descend to such humble fame.

I do not mean to impose this upon You as argument; Your understanding is too well trained to reasoning to give it such credit; but I submit to the judgment of men of sense, whether these are not the probable consequences of invading the privileges of these licensed sons of ignorance.

I know You refer me to St. John's for the success of the expedient; but if I mistake not, the care of a separate society is widely different from that of the University at large: The interest of the pensioners obliges them to submit to whatever regulations the Master and seniors think fit to establish; and their example operates strongly upon the independent part of the Society. The friendships and intimacies which are formed between the Pensioners and Fellow-Commoners transuse through the whole college a common spirit; and the latter are easily induced to submit to an authority which is compulsive on their friends; and which their not submitting to would imply an idea of superiority which at that ingenuous time of life they are ashamed to avow. Besides, the Tutors have great influence over their own pupils; and when backed by the Authority of parents, can engage and even compel them to the observance of their own particular rules.—And what is still more effectual in private colleges, that spirit of opposition, and temper of ridicule, which when they have room to act are irresistible, when confined to a few are easily broken, and the mind  
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more readily prepared for whatever mode of discipline it may be thought necessary to establish.

With regard to Noblemen, an objection of a different kind (but which may be extended to many of the Fellow-Commoners) seems to stand in the way of this general regulation. The Sons of Noblemen, of the first distinction may think it hard to be laid open to the examination of six or seven young Masters of Arts, whom they know nothing of. They may be very justly indignant to have their relative merits arbitrarily pointed out, and the stamp of their future currency in a great measure fixed by the suffrages of these select. Young men of great fortune and family must be engaged to study by easy and gentle means: and when the contrary method is practised, or too much application is exacted of them by the dread of being exposed, they will disclaim such an inquisitorial tribunal and unite in the contempt of its authority. I will only hint the imprudence of reducing ourselves, by the establishment of such an examination, to the alternative of disgracing every now and then the first people in the country, or bringing our own discipline into utter contempt.

The terror of innovation has certainly operated strongly upon some of the graver part of the university; and though such an apprehension is an enemy to improvement and reformation, yet it is justified by experience; and in matters of a doubtful  
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nature may almost be allowed to determine the judgment.

The old plan of Examination in the University certainly answers all or most of the ends of a regular education, and it is confirmed by long usage and great success. The Youth of this place look up to it with veneration, and the most determined dunce trembles in secret at its censure. A spirit of this kind is spread with difficulty among a set of young men, but when it has once begun to operate, it must produce the most salutary effects, even tho' some of its energy be lost or misapplied. If the new plan should be carried into execution without success, and instead of inspiring emulation, should be received with ridicule or contempt, who can be assured that the contagion may not spread to and debilitate the old system? The humour once acquired of despising examinations and refusing the test of such decisions, may easily extend itself to those that have hitherto animated the studies of the University.

These probable Consequences, if they do not serve as arguments, will at least justify the apprehensions of those, who are averse to innovation. And if ever conjectures may be allowed the force of facts, it is when they are formed of the consequences likely to result from the petulance, opposition, and aversion to study peculiar to Youth.

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But if one looks a little nearer, where is this great want of incentives to study even to Noblemen and Feilow-Commoners?—They certainly are not wanted in St. John's, where the young men are as straitly confined to the trammels of Study as the severest father could possibly wish: They are not wanted at Trinity, where the Latin and English declamations afford opportunities of shining in classical and historical knowledge, and the more requisite qualifications of speaking and writing the English language. They are not in fact wanted in the University at large, where the medal is at once a reward for classical and mathematical acquirements; and the examination for it the best lesson the young gentlemen will ever receive. In short, the only things wanted are, less vanity in the parents, and more inclination to study in the sons: or perhaps, to speak more properly, the only things requisite are, a good head and an indifferent fortune, the sharpest spurs to advancement in pursuing of knowledge, and the surest guides to the acquisition of it.

Many other objections present themselves; but as they may proceed from the particular light in which I cannot help viewing the proposed innovations, I will forbear to mention them; lest to persons of a serious turn, they should seem to be the phantoms of a mind perverted to ridicule. Such as appear to me to have the force of arguments, I have already given You, and if they are found to have no weight  
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I for my own part shall wish your plan may meet with all possible success. I am far from being an Enemy to the scheme as coming from You, or to yourself; but I confess that these reasons, or rather these apprehensions, have hitherto inclined me to the old system; not that I venture to be the mouth of all those who have declared themselves against the scheme, but that I wish that other more experienced persons may be induced to give their reasons for opposing a project so unexceptionable to many who know nothing of the constitution of the University. It is proper that their motives should be published, in order to convince those who give themselves the pains to think on this subject, that they do not withhold their assent from a mere principle of opposition.

I make no Apologies for the haste with which this Letter will appear to be written: my motive is a sincere regard to Alma Mater. Conscious of having derived the greatest advantages my little capacity would admit of, from its instructions, I still look up with veneration to those institutions which guided and animated my early studies; and I tremble lest the Authority of that system should be invaded, which has been so long and so successfully acquiesced in.

It is not the best abstract plan of studies that is to be wished for; nay the opinions of men are so  
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various, that it is hard to say what is the best.—The only things requisite are a habit of study, emulation, and respect to the plan in force; a mind once thoroughly exercised by these means, can easily pursue the bent of its own inclinations; and a habit of thinking once acquired cannot but be applied with success to what ever object a man may have principally in view. Happy as we are in all these requisites, we ought to be extremely cautious of any sudden or considerable alterations: Noblemen and Fellow-Commoners have many incentives to study without the formality of an annual examination; and the sensible part of them seldom fail to study with success. They are not to be forced into knowledge, nor will the generality of them submit to the indignity of having tasks set them: It is enough, that one College in the University has adopted that schoolboy plan: a more liberal one better becomes the University at large.

I am, Sir,

Your's, &c.

